

TONBRIDGE AND MALLING BOROUGH COUNCIL

TONBRIDGE FORUM

Thursday, 12th May, 2016

Present: Cllr N J Heslop (Chairman), Cllr C P Smith (Vice-Chairman), Cllr P F Bolt, Cllr D J Cure, Cllr V M C Branson, Cllr F G Tombolis and County Councillor Mr R Long.

Together with representatives from:

Kent Fire and Rescue Service, Kent Police (Tonbridge), St John's Ambulance, Tonbridge Area Churches Together, Tonbridge Civic Society, Tonbridge District Scout Council, Tonbridge Music Club, Tonbridge Rotary Club, Tonbridge Sports Association, Tonbridge Theatre and Arts Club, University of the Third Age and Women's Institute

Councillors H S Rogers, S C Perry and Mrs A S Oakley were also present pursuant to Council Procedure Rule No 15.21.

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Mrs J A Anderson, Ms J A Atkinson, Mrs P A Bates, The Bridge Trust and Society of Friends

TF 16/11 MINUTES

RESOLVED: That the Minutes of the meeting held on 8 February 2016 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

TF 16/12 UPDATE ON ANY ACTION IDENTIFIED IN THE LAST MINUTES

Reference was made to Minute Number TF 16/4 – Tonbridge High Street Improvement Scheme and the quoted completion date for the works of April 2016. Serious disappointment and concern was expressed regarding the delay to the completion of works and the ongoing traffic congestion along the High Street and the Borden.

The Chairman and the Director of Street Scene, Leisure and Technical Services appreciated the concerns raised, particularly around communication, and assured Members that the Borough Council was in regular contact with the County Council and seeking an early resolution of works.

It was also recognised that, whilst the continued delay was a frustration for residents and visitors to the town, the Scheme was a great improvement to the area and represented a commitment to investment and regeneration of the High Street. Local retailers appeared supportive

of the measures being implemented and had reported an increase in footfall to their businesses.

Tonbridge Music Club made reference to the Holmes report on 'shared space' in the United Kingdom (Accidents by Design), which aimed to establish a greater understanding of these type of schemes on the public. The Borough Council was asked to comment on the report's conclusion that many respondents did not enjoy using shared spaces and did not feel safe. The report highlighted many 'shared space' schemes that the public did not like using and where local authorities had repeatedly changed their minds and installed/reinstalled pedestrian crossings at costs not yet known. It was queried whether these schemes were fit for purpose and what were the financial implications to the Borough Council of having to revert back to a more traditional layout.

The Leader indicated that as the County Council was the responsible authority for the improvement works this question would be passed to the relevant contact within that authority for a response.

Finally, the Leader advised that it was expected that the junction with Medway Wharf road would open tomorrow (Friday 13 May) and the 'two way' on the High Street the following week. This position would be closely monitored by the Borough Council.

TF 16/13 PUBLIC CONSULTATION ON 'FAIRER CHARGING' IN TONBRIDGE AND MALLING (PRESENTATION)

The Director of Finance and Transformation advised that the Borough Council was considering changing the way it charged for the Tonbridge and Malling Borough element of the council tax bill from 2017/18 onwards. The introduction of a local charge (technically called 'special expenses') to pay for the local facilities and services provided by the Borough Council, such as local parks, playgrounds, allotments, flower displays, events, cemeteries and churchyards, was being considered. This would promote fairness for all residents in different parts of the borough when paying towards the cost of these services, generate savings to offset ongoing reduction in Government funding and protect services.

Members were shown a short video, followed by a presentation focusing on issues relevant to Tonbridge, to explain the proposal regarding fairer charging. It was explained that residents living anywhere within the Borough, other than the town of Tonbridge, paid an extra parish precept for local services such as playgrounds and open spaces provided by the parish/town council. As Tonbridge was not parished services to these residents were provided and funded by the Borough Council. However, to provide some equity, the Borough Council paid grants, totalling just over £225,000 to parish councils to help them with the costs of the local services they provided.

Tonbridge and Malling continued to face significant financial challenges due to cuts in Government funding and needed to make savings of £1.8 million over the next four years, whilst protecting the services that the authority provided. The Council had adopted a Savings and Transformation Strategy to assist with the focusing and delivering of savings from a range of areas. It was noted that the areas being reviewed as part of this process were the grants made to the parish councils. The Director of Finance and Transformation explained that it would be unfair to simply remove the grants to the parish councils without considering the cost of the local services that the Borough Council provided in Tonbridge. Members were advised that the local services provided by the Borough Council in Tonbridge totalled some £800,000 and this could be converted into a local charge which, just like a parish precept, could be charged directly to Tonbridge households.

As part of this proposal, the Borough Council was inviting borough residents, parish councils and other key stakeholders to take part in a Public Consultation. Information could be found on the Borough Council's website, including the questionnaire, the short video shown at the meeting and other supporting information. All Members and organisations were asked to spread the word and encourage residents to participate as all opinions were welcome.

The deadline for responses was **noon on Monday 20 June 2016**. Further information and a questionnaire to complete was available via: www.tmbc.gov.uk/localcharge

Reference was made to business rates being retained by local authorities and whether this would improve the Borough Council's financial pressures. The Chief Executive explained that the move to full business rate retention was not expected until 2020 and that the final detail was not yet known or understood. The proposals around business rates continued to change which made it difficult to predict and model financial implications. It was noted that grant (Revenue Support Grant) from central government was being reduced further; and, in addition to that, the Council had been expecting earlier in the year to have to pay back to Government some of the rates it currently retained over a four year period. The Chairman advised that the Borough Council had successfully argued for a 'clawback' holiday ensuring that Tonbridge and Malling did not have to pay back rates in years 2-3 of the scheme. However, this was a temporary reprieve as £1M 'clawback' was still required in year 4.

The Chairman also advised that from next year the Borough Council would no longer receive any direct Government grant funding in the form of Revenue Support Grant. This meant that the authority was reliant on business rates retention, New Homes Bonus and fees and charges. All of these issues represented a significant and complex financial challenge for Tonbridge and Malling.

Whilst Members supported the principle being proposed and welcomed the opportunity to comment, it was suggested that communication could be improved as it was difficult to understand the detail. It was commented that the video viewed earlier was a good way to get the message across. The Chief Executive welcomed this feedback and consideration would be given on how to improve the promotion of the video already on the Borough Council's website.

To promote the public consultation there would be significant media coverage in the local press, a BBC Radio Kent interview on Monday morning and leaflets/posters distributed to local libraries and other public places for displaying. Parish councils would be invited to comment at a special meeting of the Parish Partnership Panel on Wednesday 18 May 2016. The use of social media (Twitter and Facebook) was also confirmed, although it was recognised that regular posts and updates would be beneficial to keep the consultation at the top of 'news feeds'.

[Subsequent to the meeting the Borough Council was advised that the BBC Radio Kent interview would be aired on the morning of Tuesday 17 May 2016]

The meeting ended at 8.40 pm